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Men's Strengths in the Transition to Fatherhood

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Running Head: MEN'S STRENGTHS IN FATHERHOOD

Men's Strengths in the Transition to Fatherhood

Dawson C. Cooke

A Report Submitted

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of

Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours,

Faculty of Community Studies, Education and Social Sciences,

Edith Cowan University.

October 2004

I declare that this written assignment is my own work and does not include:

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Men's Strengths in the Transition to Fatherhood: A Literature Review

Abstract

This paper considers the ways men succeed or grow stronger (strengths perspectives) in the transition to fatherhood. Becoming a father is a normative life event for a man that presents a unique opportunity for developmental growth. This aspect of fatherhood has rarely been addressed in psychological literature despite the growing interest in fatherhood and strengths perspectives. An overview is given of fathering literature with attention to the transition to fatherhood, positive outcomes and strengths, and recent Australian studies. Models and classifications of strengths are introduced, including findings from the positive psychology movement (C. Peterson & M. E. P. Seligman, 2004) and family strengths model (J. DeFrain, 1999). Finally, applications of strengths perspectives to the transition to fatherhood are discussed, and suggestions are made regarding future research.

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Introduction

The transition to fatherhood is a normative, yet major life event that requires numerous changes and challenges to be negotiated. This transition extends from the conception of the first child, through the months (Strauss & Goldberg, 1999) and possibly years (Berman & Pedersen, 1987) following the child's birth. Although this transition has in the past been referred to as a *crisis*, more recently, the transition to parenthood has been understood as a developmental phase or a process (Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000). The extensive reorganisation required in this transition can produce positive rewards and gratifications in spite of the possible conflict and strains (Levy-Shiff, 1999).

Substantial progress has been made in the study of fatherhood over the past three decades (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004), with increasing acknowledgement of the diversity of the father role, and indications that men have become more interested, more aware and more involved in the role of parenting (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). However there remains a lack of research into the positive rewards or developmental growth resulting from men's introduction to parenthood.

Within psychology, there has been growing interest in people's positive strengths, virtues and meaning (strengths perspectives). These strengths perspectives address the ways people succeed and grow stronger rather than focusing on individual pathology or problem solving (DeFrain, 1999). This approach has been gaining popularity in family research, education and therapy for over 30 years (Allison, et al., 2003; Stinnett, 1979a), and in recent years is advancing through the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

This paper provides a review of research on fatherhood and specifically the transition to fatherhood. Attention will be given to Australian studies and findings of

strengths or positive development. Strength models and classifications will then be summarized and critiqued. Finally, suggestions will be made for future research and conclusions drawn regarding strengths in the transition to fatherhood.

Trends in Fatherhood

Study of the parental role of men has changed over the course of the last century from a place of little relevance, to being increasingly valued and researched (Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Hofferth, 2002). Park and Brott (1999) calculate that in the United States during the 1990s, there were over fifty new books about fathers; reflecting a growing interest in the role of fathers in contemporary society. Academic publications such as Lamb's fourth edition of The Role of the Father in Child Development (2004), and special issues of Marriage and Family Review (Peters, Peterson, Steinmetz, & Day, 2000) confirm this trend.

Australian books on fatherhood over the past decade have covered topics such as: becoming a father (Dye, 1998; Pudney & Cottrell, 1998); child raising and family life (Grose, 2000; Petre, 2000); managing work and time commitments (Petre, 1998; Robinson, 2001; and a humorous look at being a stay-at-home dad (Bryant, 2001). They have a common theme: that fathering is a challenging and rewarding task that makes a difference to children, mothers and to the fathers themselves. The Engaging Fathers Project (supported by the Commonwealth Government Department of Family and Community Services; University of Newcastle, Australia, 2004) has recently released a comprehensive report of research on Australian fathers, with one aim being to support early intervention with fathers using a strengths perspective. This Australian study follows a similar review and analysis of fatherhood research in the United States (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998).

Although substantial progress has been made in the advancement of empirical literature addressing fatherhood (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004), there is a predominance of literature that has addressed the broader theme of masculinity. These works have often neglected the experience of fatherhood and given priority to employment, sexuality, violence, crime, sport and race as more central aspects of masculinity (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Developmental psychologists who have addressed the experience of fatherhood have mostly focused on the father's influence on the child's development (Lamb, 2000), or exclusively on marital satisfaction rather than on the man's development (Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

The history and past trends of fatherhood strengths have received varied interpretations. Blankenhorn (1996), in his popular book "Fatherless America," describes the fragmentation and diminishment of fatherhood in the United States over the past two centuries. He claimed there are currently fewer explicit fathering roles or responsibilities; less importance and value of fatherhood within the home and society; and a diminished cultural definition of the father's role. An overview of fatherhood history by Lamb (2000), identified the dominant aspects of fathering over the past century as changing from the moral teacher; to the breadwinner; the sex-role model; and then finally to the nurturing father. Other researchers (LaRossa, 1997), however, argue that various expressions of fatherhood can be found at any period of time in different communities and cultures. For example, Coontz (2000) suggests that there is a tendency to look at the past with 'rose coloured glasses' and that the 'traditional American family' or 'good old-fashioned parenting' is unrealistic, exhausting and possibly even a myth. Children's living arrangements in the past show the 1950s to have been the peak of the traditional breadwinner-homemaker family (50% of all families). Since then, these numbers have reduced dramatically as

dual-earner and single parent families have rapidly increased to be by far the most common family types (Cherlin, 1998).

Fatherhood versus Motherhood

The role of fatherhood has undergone many changes and recent studies show that the demographic, family, and socio-economic circumstances of fathers are remarkably and increasingly diverse (Hofferth, 2002). Many commentators on fatherhood emphasise that definitions of fatherhood fluctuate and are dependent on culture and society, whereas motherhood is primarily biologically defined and has remained relatively stable (Blankenhorn, 1996; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Park & Brott, 1999). The most consistent component of the father role over recent history has been that of the breadwinner–providing economic support for the family (Lamb, 1998). Play behaviour has been found to be the most salient aspect of father-child relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2004) most likely because it is considered to be enjoyable and can fit into a father's flexible schedule (Leve-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988).

Research with fathers has given support to the commonly reported trend of fathering moving toward a more nurturing and involved parental role (Morman & Floyd, 2002). It remains, however, that the interaction of men with their children is often constrained by dominant sociocultural expectations that fathers should work to support the family while the mother 'bonds' with the infant (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Parke's (2002) overview of fatherhood research, concludes that there have been modest increases in the involvement of fathers in parenting over the past several decades; however, mothers continue to generally take responsibility for the managerial aspects of parenting, and fathers are often more involved with play activity rather than caregiving.

Backett's (1982) study of Scottish middle class parenthood identified the problematic nature of fatherhood as "negotiating with the mother a mutually satisfactory degree of *direct* involvement in home and family life" (p. 195). The participants in Backett's study were clear on many fundamental and seemingly unchangeable aspects of 'being a mother', however this was not the case for fatherhood and the man's involvement had to be negotiated in ways specific to the couple's situation.

Participation of Fathers in Research

A clear self-selection bias has been found with fathers participating in research that required high commitment (Costigan & Cox, 2001). Costigan and Cox's study on this bias found fathers seemed to be more difficult to recruit into studies and appeared less available or willing to participate than mothers. It showed that participating fathers were over-represented in families with higher educational attainment and occupational status. Families of participating fathers also tended to be more positive functioning, with infants who were healthier and had easier temperaments. Although there were many other measures of no difference between fathers who did or did not participate in research, these findings suggest that the conclusions from much research on fatherhood should be treated with some caution and may not generalise to all fathers.

The Transition to Fatherhood

Men's participation in pregnancy and childbirth provides opportunity for them to define their meaning of fatherhood; and involved fathers seem to benefit themselves, their marriage, the mothers, and the infants (Park, 1996). Unfortunately, this critical period of a man's life has been largely overlooked in recent research on fatherhood (Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004). During the transition to

fatherhood, the social and personal obstacles that can keep men disconnected from their role as father are significant, complex and multiple. However, early parenting research, antenatal education, and clinical practice with new parents have had a strong bias toward addressing the experience of mothers (Burgess, 1997), and measuring stress or difficulty. Following an overview of research on the transition to fatherhood, this review will then address four areas of importance in this transition: father/child attachment, role changes, education, and developmental opportunities.

Transition to Fatherhood Research

Barclay and Lupton (1999) studied first-time fathers from just prior to the birth of a child, through to when the child was 6 months old. Their interviews with Australian fathers revealed high and often unrealistic expectations that they would be 'involved' and 'bond' with their newborn child. These men seemed to receive emotional rewards that were proportional to the amount of time and energy they invested in intimate contact with their child. However, the quantity of father-child time does not necessarily predict the quality of parenting (Park, 2002). Measures of a father's time with children should therefore be interpreted with caution. Park's review of fatherhood literature led him to conclude that most fathers are capable caregivers and playmates even though they may have limited parental involvement.

An Australian longitudinal study of first-time fathers' mental health and well being (Condon, et al., 2004) assessed psychological, relationship and lifestyle aspects of 312 fathers at 23 weeks of their partner's pregnancy; with post-natal follow-up at 3, 6, and 12 months. This study found that pregnancy was the most stressful period for fathers, with only a small improvement in stress levels at 3 months and little change at 6 and 12 months. Men anticipated sexual activity with their partner to return to pre-pregnancy levels within the first year after the birth, but this was rarely

achieved, and during the first year there was increasing disillusionment with the sexual relationship.

Robinson (2001) interviewed over 75 Australian fathers and found the most common comments to be 'I never thought about it' (unprepared for fatherhood); 'I had no idea what was really required of a dad'; 'I was resistant to the idea of "learning" about fathering'; and 'I was always uncomfortable talking about personal stuff'. Similar themes were found by another Australian study "Being a Dad to a child under two" (Ladbrook, 2003). This study found the dominant influence on parenting roles came from one's own parent(s), and about one third of fathers had not given much thought to what fatherhood meant to them until they had a child in the home.

Heinicke's (2002) review of the transition to parenting literature identified a number of aspects associated with optimal parenting adjustment: efficient, nonanxious, flexible problem solving; the ability to sustain a positive mutuality with their partner; and the ability to maintain their autonomy and self-esteem. They also found that children's positive development was determined by the parent's ability to confront difficult issues; regulate negative affect; and resolve differences. These conclusions, however, are based primarily on research with mothers; and the fatherhood research cited is mostly related to how the father contributes to marital adjustment.

Child-Father Attachment and Play

The attachment relationship between a child and parent is of great importance to both social and emotional development (Lamb & Lewis, 2004). A longitudinal study of 44 families (Grossmann, et al., 2002) found that infant-father attachment predicted attachment representations at age 6, but not at 10 and 16. Infant-mother

attachment predicted attachment representation at age 6 and 10, but not 16. Interestingly, though, a father's sensitive and challenging interactive play with his toddler predicted the child's attachment representation at ages 10 and 16. Mother's play, however, was not a significant predictor at any age measured. These results highlight the importance of father-child play activity, and the need to examine the measures used when assessing family systems, in particular, measures designed for and validated for mothers that are later applied to fathers (Lamb & Lewis, 2004).

Role Changes

The new mother usually receives much attention during the pregnancy and forms an intimate bond with the developing child; however, the experience of the new father is less clear; and it is possible that he can feel left out of this process and undervalues his role (Rose, 2000). Cowan (1988) grouped the changes associated with becoming a father into five categories: individual self-concept and self-esteem, marital roles and communication, parenting attitudes and stress, intergenerational relationships, and support and stress from outside the nuclear family. Cowan and Cowan's (1987) study of men's involvement in parenthood found the couple relationship to be the most influential domain of family life that potentially supported or created barriers to involvement in parenting. Although Cowan's studies revealed a general decline in marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, this result is not surprising since during men's transition the role of father is more salient and given more importance than the role of spouse (Strauss & Goldberg, 1999). The role of the grandparents is also of great importance to fathering (Cowan & Cowan, 1987): both the father's relationship with his own parents (as a child and as a new parent) and the involvement of the mother's parents. These inter-generational relationships

have potential to be a powerful agent for support and strength to the man's fathering role.

Strauss and Goldberg (1999) found evidence that the father's social leisure role is reduced, but not his work role. He suggested that this was due to an increased sense of being the provider for the family. A recent survey of Australian fathers, found that as their number of hours worked increased, their satisfaction with work hours decreased and their preference to work fewer hours increased (Weston, Gray, Qu & Stanton, 2004). Although the results had considerable variability and the majority of well-being measures found no difference between fathers' working long hours and those working standard hours. Robinson (2001) also found this variety of work experiences in his interviews with Australian fathers. He concluded that there is a cost to being a father in terms of time, energy, finance and career advancement. However, men from different careers and family situations call for different balances of the costs and benefits. The Weston et al. survey reported that the most important aspect of managing work and family was finding ways that work demands complement the partner's commitments/work and the family's routines.

Leve-Shiff and Israelashvili's (1988) research with fathers of 9 month-old children found that men with less demanding jobs were not more involved with caregiving than those with high demand employment. Men with less demanding jobs did, however, have more time for play and affiliative behaviours with their children. As discussed earlier, father/infant play activity has been found to predict father/child attachment.

Antenatal Education

A high proportion of men attend antenatal sessions with their partners (McElligott, 2001), however, they are often dissatisfied with the experience and feel

ill-prepared for their new role (Lee & Schmied, 2001). Men have been found to have particular interests and needs in antenatal education, and the involvement of male facilitators and men only sessions have proved to be beneficial (Lee & Schmied, 2001; Robertson, 1999). High on the list of topics men find helpful in antenatal classes are: the role of the father, and care of the baby after delivery (McElligott, 2001; Smith, 1999). Eighty percent of the men in McElligott's study indicated they wanted to attend sessions; and their reasons for non-attendance included unsuitable timing and the impression that the sessions were only for women.

Developmental Opportunities

The transition to fatherhood does not fit neatly into a developmental theory that defines markers indicating the advancement to a new developmental phase (Cowan, 1988). Cowan explained that this was because increasing numbers of couples were choosing to not have a child. Some men become a father later in life after many years in a relationship or after a number of relationships, and others become fathers very early in their first intimate relationship. In addition to these trends, there is no widely accepted definition of the main tasks of fathering or what would be considered mastery of these tasks. Although it may be important to consider the timing of becoming a father the implications of parental age are not clear. Neville and Parke, (1997) found that younger fathers (<26 years) were more physical and less verbal in their interaction with their child when compared with older fathers (>29 years), although neither group was found to have superior father-child relationships.

Middle adulthood, and parenthood in particular, were considered by Erikson to present the need to experience generativity: to produce or have meaning beyond one's self and to impact the next generation (Erikson, 1964; Holland, 1998). The

other basic need of young adulthood is for intimacy, and both these needs are experienced in their most likely form through marriage (or cohabitation) and parenting. Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) identified the consequences of fatherhood involvement that was most commonly found in research included: role satisfaction and conflict; psychological well-being; and generativity. They concluded that high paternal involvement has potential short-term costs such as decreased self-esteem and increased work-family conflict; however, these experiences could lead to higher levels of functioning and greater societal generativity.

Personality.

Leve-Shiff and Israelashvili's (1988) study found that personality dimensions of autonomy, sensitivity, perception and openness to experience predicted caregiving behaviour in first-time fathers of 9 month-old children. Care giving, however, was seen as traditionally the mother's role (i.e. a cross-sex type activity for fathers) as well as being tedious and determined by the child's needs rather than parental availability. Men that viewed fatherhood as a self-enriching experience that met psychological and social needs were also most likely to engage in caregiving and play behaviour. Lasarus (2003a) made the following statement regarding personality change:

> For the stable adult, a major personality change may require a trauma, a personal crisis, or a religious conversion. Abandoning unserviceable goals and counterproductive ways of coping with life in favour of more effective ways of coping is very difficult without the mobilisation that crisis can produce (p.105).

Becoming a parent may well be one of these unique 'crisis' experiences that a man experiences: providing opportunity for significant personality change.

Maturity development.

Cowan (1988) suggests that the developmental changes that occur as a result of parenthood are not a *stage* as would have been described within Freud and Piaget's theories, and are characterised by variability and a lack of sequence. Alternatively, he suggests qualitative changes occur during the transition, which give opportunity for the development of *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation is defined as the increasing ability to make specific and appropriate responses to new situations rather than generalising; and integration is the unifying and coordinating of different elements of the person or system. Cowan describes these changes within a developmental concept of maturity, based on Allport's (1961) functional theory of personality.

This optimistic view of maturity development (Cowan, 1988) was framed in the developmental characteristics of self-concept, competence and couple relationship. Within self-concept, it was found that men had a profound change in their sense of identity and a greater awareness of locus of control. Although Cowan found no significant changes in self-esteem, Hawkins and Belsky (1989) identified a moderate decrease in self-esteem with greater father involvement or involvement with sons; and increased self-esteem with lesser father involvement or involvement with daughters. This surprising result is possibly due to self-esteem being influenced by a commitment to employment which may decrease with father involvement; a sense of masculinity which may decrease if engaging in traditionally feminine sex-role activities; and sons possibly requiring more involvement from the father while daughters accentuate the father's masculinity as they are the only male in the family (Cowan, 1988; Hawkins & Belsky, 1889). Increases or decreases in self-esteem are not necessarily an indication of positive or negative self-development. As indicated

by both these studies, decreases in self-esteem may be overshadowed by many other benefits of fatherhood, and high self-esteem may not be based on verifiable psychological and social competence.

The elements of competence maturity outlined by Cowan (1988) were problem solving, perspective taking, regulation of emotion, and commitment. New challenges and conflicting demands experienced in the transition to parenting often presented as a time of stress, providing opportunity to apply appropriate resources and problem solving abilities. Some men were able to revise their philosophy of life and create new ways of making sense of their current situation with a broader perspective. Emotional regulation was an area of great potential change for the new fathers. The pride and responsibility of fatherhood enabled many men to control their needs and feelings for the benefit of the family; alternatively, some men reported the positive development of a greater awareness of emotions and being more comfortable with self-disclosure. Many men interviewed in Cowan's study became more actively engaged in their inner and outer world throughout the transition to parenting, with increased commitment and vitality.

Although the transition to fatherhood does not result in positive growth or development for all men, Cowan's (1988) elements of maturity in this transition present an insightful framework with which to identify the challenges and opportunities of fatherhood. It should be noted however, that Cowan referred to these findings as resulting from a "speculative reexamination" (p. 23) of data, and as being the counterweight to the original findings of negative changes during the transition.

Strengths Perspectives

Positive Psychology

Scientific enquiry within psychology and the human sciences has traditionally been a deficit model, focusing on healing, problem solving or ability to endure adversity (Allison, et al., 2003; DeFrain, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology proposes an alternative approach; the study of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and institutions that enable these experiences and traits (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is evident from the literature reviewed in this paper that fathers may well suffer some losses as well as achieve gains in the transition to fatherhood; however, as Seligman and Pawelski (2003) have observed, "persons who are... [suffering in some way] care about far more than merely the relief of their suffering. These persons care—sometimes desperately–about strength and virtue, about authenticity, about meaning, and about integrity" (p. 162).

The origins of positive psychology began in 1996 with a moment of insight, when a man (Martin Seligman) came to more fully understand his role as a father through a memorable conversation with his 5-year-old daughter (Seligman, 2002). Recently, with the publication of the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the positive psychology movement has come of age. In this handbook 24 specific strengths have been classified under the six virtues of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Peterson and Seligman identify child rearing as one of the "natural homes for human excellence [where] ...virtuosity is recognised, celebrated, and encouraged" (p.639),

The VIA individual strengths are not context/environment specific and not necessarily responses to negative or deficit states, or even as the positive extreme of a dimension with an opposing negative (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). However, Peterson and Seligman (2004) note that character may not always be relevant outside a context where it is called upon. Maslow (1968) certainly thought that development required a challenging context, described the transition from one developmental stage to another in the following way:

> Each step forward is a step into the unfamiliar and is possibly dangerous. It also means giving up something familiar and good and satisfying. It frequently means a parting and a separation, even a kind of death prior to rebirth, with consequent nostalgia, fear, loneliness and mourning.
>
> It also often means giving up a simpler and easier and less effortful life, in exchange for a more demanding, more responsible, more difficult life. Growth forward is in spite of these losses and therefore requires courage, will, choice, and strength in the individual, as well as protection, permission and encouragement from the environment... (p. 204).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) disagree with Maslow's specific hierarchy hypothesis and stress that strengths are found in all classes of people at any stage of development; however, they believe his characteristics of self-actualised individuals greatly reflected their own classification of strengths. One aspect of the hierarchy concept is helpful in that strengths may not be developed or displayed in adverse environments such as when deprived of sustenance or safety. In the context of fatherhood it could be that strengths are less likely to be expressed if the situation is particularly unconducive: such as long work hours and high stress at work, or extreme gatekeeping by the mother (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Family Strengths Perspectives

The Family Strengths Model developed by Stinnett, DeFrain and associates (DeFrain, 1999; Olson & DeFrain, 2003; Stinnett, 1979b; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1989), also advocates the study and interest in strengths rather than problems. They propose that investigating problems and weaknesses tends to only find problems, and neglects to account for success and health. Identifying strengths can "become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and society" (DeFrain, 1999, p. 6). From many studies across diverse cultures, six general qualities of family strengths have been identified: commitment; appreciation and affection; positive communication; time together; spiritual well being; and the ability to cope with stress and crisis.

Other models include the Minnesota Family Strength Project (Family and Children's Service, 1999) that identified five main themes around family strengths: communication, health, time together, spirituality, and support. An Australian framework identified eight family qualities (the Australian Family Strengths Template; Silberberg, 2001): communication, togetherness, sharing activities, affection, support, acceptance, commitment, and resilience. These correspond closely with the Family Strengths Model (DeFrain, 1999) with the exclusion of a spirituality dimension and the addition of the dimensions of togetherness and support. Another approach to family strengths has been the Search Institute's (2003) 40 Developmental Assets for Infants. These assets are positive experiences, characteristics and behaviours that contribute to the healthy development of an infant. External assets are the experiences that a child receives from their environment and are categorised as: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets are those qualities that

reflect children's positive internal development: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

The problem-solving processes, available resources, communication skills, and belief systems of a family, greatly influence a father's resilience during times of change, stress or challenge (Walsh, 1996). Olsen's Circumplex model or couple and family map (DeFrain, 1999; Olsen, 1988, Olson & DeFrain, 2003) provides a means of assessing the health of families by focusing on the dimensions of flexibility, cohesion and communication within a family system. Families that are balanced on the dimensions of flexibility (from rigid to chaotic) and cohesion (from disengaged to enmeshed) are considered healthier and more functional than unbalanced family types. These dimensions of a family system are dynamic and particularly so during times of stress or transition. An example is given by Olsen and DeFrain of a typical couple's experience of flexibility being chaotic in the period following the birth of their child, and then rigid during the toddler/preschool stage of parenting. Likewise a couple's cohesion may be enmeshed in the early years of marriage and move towards disengaged with the challenges of role changes in parenthood. Grossman, Pollack and Golding (1988) found that in healthy family systems, men's fathering is strongly affected by their partners. This highlights the need to consider fatherhood strengths within a relational family systems.

Criticisms of Strengths Perspectives

There are a number of common criticisms of the positive strengths approach (Gable & Haidt, in press; Lazarus, 2003a; Saleebey, 1996). Firstly, it has been argued that focussing on strengths is simply another form of positive thinking or has nothing to add to previous movements such as humanistic psychology. Seligman (2002) contends the principles of positive psychology are not new ideas, however,

previous attempts to look beyond pathology and disorder have "failed to attract a cumulative and empirical body of research to ground their ideas" (p. 7). Saleebey argues that people in challenging circumstances are not given to thinking in terms of their strengths and therapists must work hard to devise strict and accurate accounting of client's assets so as to capitalise on their resources, talents, knowledge, and motivation.

Another criticism is that a focus on strengths and the positive makes a false dichotomy of the positive and negative, and minimises or even denies reality (Lazarus, 2003b). Although these are possibilities, they should not deter researchers and therapists from striving for a balance to the past preoccupation with human deficits and illness. Without diminishing or devaluing the search for understanding of disorders and their treatment, effort is required to further the understand the strengths that buffer against mental illness and what it is that makes life worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Schneider (2001) describes realistic optimism as possible when following an earnest effort to reach a goal; unexpected bad outcomes may then be reasonably attributed to external, unstable, and specific factors, while unexpected good outcomes would be attributed to internal, stable, and global factors.

Fatherhood Strengths

There has been a tendency to measure or assess problems and stress related to the transition to parenthood, rather than measures of developmental change or the potential for positive growth (Cowan 1988). An unfortunately pessimistic hypothesis by Ross (2001) highlights some of the negative conclusions drawn from fatherhood studies; he proposed:

...it may be that the 'caring and sharing' new man does not help reduce relationship dissatisfactions for the new mother by increasing his proportion of household tasks, as might have been hoped, but that through increasingly equitable role performance, the new man simply becomes equally dissatisfied as the new mother with the unremitting multiple demands of infant care, household care, and occupational responsibility during the early transition to parenthood. (pp. 564-565)

Hawkins and Belsky (1989) also found disappointing consequences from father involvement. However, he concluded that although increased involvement predicted decline in father's self-esteem, the difficulties of involved parenting were not detrimental to growth and adaptation, and may be necessary for some aspects of development.

Biddulph (1995) stated that "Fathering is a vital, honourable and essential part of the fabric of human life" (p.133). Although no particular study has systematically investigated the strengths of fatherhood, some conclusions can be drawn from the literature covered in this paper. Traditionally, the positive father role has been one of the provider and protector, the teacher of gender roles and the disciplinarian (Pleck, 2004). More recently, breadwinning and economic provision have been the most salient and consistent aspects of fathering (Lamb, 1998), and recognition has been given to the importance of play in father-child interaction (Park, 2002). Cowan's (1988) markers of development in the transition to fatherhood provide a framework of the possibilities of growth in maturity, with focus on the opportunities to develop differentiation and integration. Finally, a number of family strengths or assets models and the recent character strengths and virtues classification

provide a comprehensive resource of possible strengths that may be relevant to new fathers.

Strengths Perspectives and Fatherhood Research

Seligman (2002) suggests that the recognition and building of strengths is a common strategy employed by all competent psychotherapists. As an illustration he claims that all such therapy forces a process of narration–telling the stories of our lives and making sense of the seemingly chaotic by distilling and identifying direction or purpose–and this process gives a sense of agency and buffers against mental disorder. A positive, hopeful perspective and a strengths orientation are fundamental to solution-focused brief therapies and narrative therapies (Allison et al., 2003; Carr, 2000). Although family strengths models and character or asset classifications are certainly useful for therapy, research has yet to confirm the particular relevance of these strengths in the context of fatherhood. This knowledge would be especially helpful to clinicians working in antenatal and early parenting education, training and therapy; since these health professionals are the most likely to engage with new fathers.

As highlighted earlier in this paper, fathers are more difficult to recruit than mothers for family research (Costigan & Cox, 2001) and therefore are likely to be misrepresented in family strengths research. Also, because the mother is generally the child's main caregiver (93% in Allison et al., 2003; no single fathers or fathers from blended/stepfamilies in Silberberg, 2001), self-report measures by families are predominately the perspective of the mother. These aspects of family research raise the question of whether fathers may provide a different perspective on family strengths than what has been found so far.

The observations and suggestions by Cowan (1988) remain much the same over 15 years after he made them: The dimensions of fathering continue to change rapidly and more longitudinal, life span studies of men in their family roles are required. There is also a need for studies that permit assessment of causal direction, rather than retrospective reports and cross-sectional data (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), although Lupton and Barclay (1997) claim there is a particular lack in psychological research of the fatherhood transition utilising in-depth interviews rather than quantitative and statistical analysis. Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (2004) suggest there is need for researchers to further explore fathers' views about aspects of fathering, and to discover the many characteristics associated with positively involved fathers.

To specifically identify the strengths in the transition to fatherhood a range of research designs and data collection would be necessary (Park, 2000). Initially, qualitative investigations using interviews could identify the most common strengths, then surveys and questionnaires with larger samples could verify the validity of the findings. Intervention studies would determine if these strengths could be developed, or hindrances to there development reduced, and the developmental outcomes for men, families and children.

Conclusion

It seems that men are becoming more involved with parenting, yet their role is less defined than ever and little is known about their personal resources or strengths in this role. As strengths perspectives and positive psychology gain popularity and empirical validity, more specific application of these models will be possible. Presently, these strengths perspectives have not considered strengths in the role of fatherhood; therefore, this paper proposes the application of a strengths

perspective to the transition to fatherhood. Identification of fatherhood strengths would assist in the building of a clearer identity for fathers in the context of changing family forms and the diminishment of the father role. With a clearer picture of strong fatherhood, both fathers and those who seek to support them will be equipped to pursue and achieve those goals.

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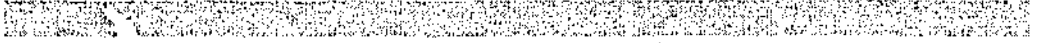
Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Publications

Guidelines for writing for Family Matters

Family Matters is the research journal, produced in a magazine format, of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It reports on the research and related activities of the Institute, as well as on the work of other Australian and overseas family researchers and organisations.

Family Matters is published by the Institute three times a year, in April/May, August/September, and December/January. Each edition is approximately 60 pages.

Acceptance of all *Family Matters* articles is subject to a formal review and assessment process.

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Readership

Consistent with the Institute's charter to disseminate family research and information as widely as possible, *Family Matters* is designed, in its content and appearance, to appeal to a broad cross-section of readers who have an interest in the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in other family-related research, and in activities and policies that promote the social and economic wellbeing of families and family life.

Family Matters subscribers include: libraries, schools and colleges; health and welfare organisations; federal, state and local government policy makers; church and legal organisations, practitioners in family-related professions; and private individuals concerned to keep up to date with research and debate concerning families in Australia.

Family Matters is essential reading for those who work with families, or who want to understand and keep abreast of family research and of changes in policy, trends and issues affecting families.

Contents

Family Matters reflects diverse perspectives and analyses of family research and policy in Australia and overseas.

The contents of each edition comprise a mix of (1) papers reporting findings from current Australian Institute of Family Studies research, and papers reporting other relevant family research; (2) shorter research-based articles, family-related opinion columns and informational pieces; and (3) regular feature columns including a 'book notes' section on recently published material received by the Institute's Family Information Centre, and a comprehensive listing of forthcoming conferences and workshops. (In this document, material in category (1) is named "Research Articles", and material in categories (2) and (3) is referred to as "General Articles".)

In each issue, a cluster of several or so research articles will reflect a particular theme selected by the Publications Committee. Each issue has a coordinator of academic papers, designated by the Publications Committee, who acquires papers and liaises with authors - in consultation with the editor, the Publications Committee and, in particular, the research manager.

Review process

Family Matters aims to present contemporary research and debate on issues affecting families to a wide readership which goes beyond narrow academic and professional specialists. It seeks to promote high standards of reporting and good quality writing in a style of presentation that will reach an "informed lay public" and appeal to a broad cross-section of readers with interests in family-related research, policies and programs.

The review process for manuscripts offered for publication in *Family Matters* will therefore reflect these twin requirements of high reporting standards and general accessibility.

Acceptance of all *Family Matters* material is subject to a formal review and assessment process by the Institute's Publications Committee and, on a case by case basis as required, by other Institute or external readers with expertise in a particular area. As with all material published by the Institute, no *Family Matters* articles may proceed to publication without the approval of the Director.

Overall, consideration will be given to whether research articles and general articles are clearly written, jargon-free, accessible and of interest to the broad range of informed lay readers that constitute the *Family Matters* readership, and whether articles are consistent with the Institute's "author guidelines".

The following aspects of research articles and general articles submitted to *Family Matters* will be particularly addressed in the course of the review process.

Criteria for acceptance of research articles

1. Subject matter
   - Timeliness of topic
   - Significance of the research
   - Originality of the argument
2. Style
   - Clarity of stated aims and research propositions
   - Adequate and appropriate use of literature and other research
   - Clear presentation and logical organisation of material
   - Quality, cogency and balance of the discussion/argument
   - Article goes beyond mere description
3. Data
   - Appropriate methodological information
   - Adequacy of the quality of data
   - Adequacy of data analysis
   - Adequacy of data interpretation
4. Conclusions
   - Conclusions substantiated by convincing analytical argument
   - Balance and relevance of policy implications and recommendations

Criteria for acceptance of general articles

- Timeliness of article
- Significance of the topic
- Article goes beyond mere description
- Clear presentation and logical organisation of material
- Cogency and clarity of the article
- Factual accuracy
- Conclusions substantiated by convincing analytical argument
- Quality and balance of the argument or information presented
- Balance and relevance of any policy implications drawn

Providing the assessment

Comments that reviewers wish not to be conveyed to the author may be provided to the editor and other members of the editorial panel and labelled: *Confidential - not for author.*

Other comments, or the editor's summary of comments, will, at the Institute's discretion, be forwarded to the author (1) in cases where a manuscript is rejected or (2) if it is thought the comments will help in the preparation of suitable revision.

In addition to their written assessment, reviewers may also write comments directly on the manuscript.

Style guidelines

The following provides an outline of the style preferred for articles published in *Family Matters.*

Writing style

Papers should be accessible and engaging to our informed, interested but essentially *non-specialist* audience. Generally, a clear, concise, straight-forward writing style, using direct language with a minimum of specialist jargon, is preferred for *Family Matters.*

Length

The length of research papers depends on various factors. Usually, however, from 2,500 - 4,500 and not more than 5,500 words is a satisfactory length. (There are 800 - 1,000 words per printed magazine page, depending on number and size of headings, graphics and photographs.)

Graphs and tables

Graphs and tables should be used sparingly and must be succinct, uncomplicated and accessible.

Other requirements

The title of the article, while reflecting the scope of its contents, should be as concise as possible. The title should be followed by a short, paragraph-length abstract, featuring the main aims and highlights of the paper.

Succinct headings throughout, for the purpose of guiding the reader, are appreciated; generally, these should comprise not more than two grades - that is, A and B heads.

The Harvard (author - date) style of referencing is used. Footnotes are not encouraged, and appendices can not be accommodated.

Papers should be accompanied by a short author biographical note.

Providing the article

Final submissions should be sent electronically as an attachment to an email.

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Note for honours submission:

The author has followed these guidelines as much as possible, while also taking into account the editorial style required in the School of Psychology Honours Handbook. For example, an abstract, appendices and detailed methodology have been included in this paper, although they may not be required for Family Matters submission. In addition, the table (not APA format) is designed to be suitable for Family Matters style publication.

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An Exploration of Men's Strengths in the Transition to Fatherhood

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Edith Cowan University

An Exploration of Men's Strengths in the Transition to Fatherhood

Abstract

Men's perceived strengths during the transition to fatherhood were explored from interviews with 10 first-time fathers of 2–12 month-old children. Adopting the principles of positive psychology, this qualitative research identified aspects of men's positive experience in fatherhood. Seven key fatherhood strengths themes were identified: shared parental responsibility, complementarity, adaptability, philosophical outlook, self development, generative care, and bonding with the child. These strengths were mediated by five contextual factors: couple relationship, work conditions, social influences, health of family members and age/maturity. Comparisons are made with other strengths models. These findings give insight into the positive experience of fatherhood and can be used as a resource by practitioners working with fathers from both a family strengths and solution–focused perspective.

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Supervisors: Associate Professor Lisbeth Pike

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Submitted: October 2004

Introduction

The transition to fatherhood is a normative and major life event for a man, which requires numerous changes and challenges to be negotiated. This transition extends from the conception of the first child, through the months following the child's birth (Strauss & Goldberg, 1999). Although in the past this transition has been referred to as a *crisis* (Berman & Pedersen, 1987), more recently, the transition to parenthood has been understood as a developmental phase or a process (Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000). In spite of the possible conflict and strains, the extensive reorganisation required during this transition can produce positive rewards and gratifications (Levy-Shiff, 1999).

Substantial research interest has been given to fatherhood over the past three decades (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000; Park & Brott, 1999). However, there remains a lack of research into the positive rewards or developmental growth resulting from men's transition to parenthood. Advancing this area of research is timely, given that within psychology there has been growing interest in people's positive strengths, virtues and meaning (strengths perspectives). These strengths perspectives address the ways people succeed and grow stronger rather than focusing on individual pathology (DeFrain, 1999). This approach has been gaining popularity in family research, education and therapy for over 30 years (Allison, et al., 2003; Stinnett, 1979a), and in recent years is advancing through the positive psychology movement (Gable & Haidt, in press; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

A Strengths Perspective

Scientific enquiry within psychology and the human sciences has traditionally been a deficit model, focusing on healing and solving problems, or

people's ability to endure adversity (Allison, et al., 2003; DeFrain, 1999). Strengths perspectives propose an alternative approach; the study of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003), and the qualities that contribute to personal worth and satisfaction (Silberberg, 2001).

The recently published *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) details 24 specific strengths under the six virtues of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Although these character strengths are not context specific, Peterson and Seligman identified child rearing as one of the "natural homes for human excellence...[where virtuosity could be] recognised, celebrated, and encouraged" (p.639).

The Family Strengths Model (Stinnett, 1979b; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1989) also represents the study of and interest in strengths rather than problems. From many studies across diverse cultures, six general qualities of family strengths have been identified: commitment; appreciation and affection; positive communication; time together; spiritual wellbeing; and the ability to cope with stress and crisis. An Australian version of this model proposed eight family qualities (the Australian Family Strengths Template; Silberberg, 2001). These corresponded closely with the Family Strengths Model with the exclusion of the spirituality dimension and the addition of the dimensions of togetherness and support. A common limitation of family strengths models is that fathers have been under-represented in research samples (Allison et al., 2003; Silberberg, 2001); and therefore, it is possible that these studies emphasise strengths that are biased towards the experience of motherhood.

The Transition to Fatherhood

Research has indicated that men's participation in pregnancy and childbirth can be of benefit to themselves, their marriage, the mothers, and the infants (Park, 1996). Unfortunately, this critical period of a man's life has been largely overlooked in recent research on fatherhood (Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004), and research with new parents has had a strong bias toward addressing the experience of mothers (Burgess, 1997). The following literature highlights the few studies of positive experience in the transition to fatherhood and other research that draw attention to the need for the current study.

Middle adulthood, and parenthood in particular, were considered by Erikson (1964) to present the need to experience *generativity*: to produce or have meaning beyond one's self and to impact the next generation (Holland, 1998). Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) identified generativity as one of the most commonly found consequences of fatherhood involvement. They concluded that although high paternal involvement has potential short-term costs, these experiences could lead to higher levels of parental functioning and greater generativity. One aspect of generativity is the role of work and provision of finances for the family. Strauss and Goldberg (1999) found evidence that the father's social leisure role was reduced, but not his work role, and suggested that this was due to an increased sense of being the provider for the family.

Barclay and Lupton (1999) studied first-time Australian fathers and found these men seemed to receive emotional rewards that were proportional to the amount of time and energy they invested in intimate contact with their child. Similarly, how closely men's actual experience of fathering involvement matched their ideal father role has been found to have an impact on men's psychological wellbeing (Strauss &

Goldberg, 1999). Park's (2002) review of fatherhood literature led him to conclude that most fathers are capable caregivers and playmates even though they may have limited parental involvement.

Heinicke's (2002) review of the transition to parenting literature identified a number of aspects associated with optimal parenting adjustment: efficient, nonanxious, flexible problem solving; the ability to sustain a positive mutuality with their partner; and the ability to maintain their autonomy and self-esteem. He also found that children's positive development was determined by the parent's ability to confront difficult issues; regulate negative affect; and resolve differences. These conclusions, however, are based primarily on research with mothers; and the fatherhood research cited is mostly related to how the father contributes to marital adjustment.

Cowan (1988) suggested qualitative changes occur during the transition to fatherhood, which give opportunity for the development of *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation is defined as the increasing ability to make specific and appropriate responses to new situations rather than generalising; and integration is the unifying and coordinating of different elements of the person or system. Cowan describes these changes within a developmental concept of maturity, based on Allport's (1961) functional theory of personality. He found that men experienced a profound change in their sense of identity and a greater awareness of locus of control. New challenges and conflicting demands experienced in the transition to parenting often presented as a time of stress, providing opportunity to apply appropriate resources and problem solving abilities. Some men were able to revise their philosophy of life and create new ways of making sense of their current situation with a broader perspective. Emotional regulation was an area of great

potential development for the new fathers. The pride and responsibility of fatherhood enabled many men to control their needs and feelings for the benefit of the family; alternatively, some men reported the positive development of a greater awareness of emotions and being more comfortable with self-disclosure. Many men interviewed in Cowan's study became more actively engaged in their inner and outer world throughout the transition to parenting, with increased commitment and vitality. Of all the domains of family life, Cowan and Cowan (1987) found the couple relationship to be the most influential; and either supported or created barriers to the father's involvement in parenting.

A Fatherhood Strengths Study

Although no particular study has systematically investigated the positive aspects of fatherhood, there is an increasing interest in the research and discourse on fatherhood (Park & Brott, 1999). There has however, been a tendency to measure or assess problems and stress related to the transition to parenthood, rather than measures of developmental change or the potential for positive growth (Cowan, 1988). Some studies suggest particularly negative consequences from fatherhood involvement (Ross, 2001), and others identify numerous risk factors and potential for psychological distress in becoming a father (Condon, et al., 2004). In contrast, Hawkins and Belsky (1989) concluded that the difficulties of involved parenting were not detrimental to growth and adaptation, and may be necessary for some aspects of development. Biddulph (1995) expressed the sentiment of popular literature on fatherhood when he stated, "Fathering is a vital, honourable and essential part of the fabric of human life" (p.133).

The author's interest in this area of study stemmed from his own personal and professional experience of the transition to fatherhood. From the experience of being

a father and as a facilitator fathers' groups, I have learnt much from recognising the positive aspects of fatherhood. I strongly endorse DeFrain's (1999) observation that, identifying strengths can "become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and society" (p. 6). In my experience, fatherhood is rarely discussed in terms of being a peak developmental or emotional experience. However, when the positive aspects of fatherhood are addressed, most men agree that becoming a father is of great significance to them. Such conversations often lead to a renewed determination to be a 'good' father. Secondly, and vitally strategic for clinical work with fathers, is the value of accessing existing, perceived, personal strengths (resources, assets, or positive attributes) in building resilience and coping strategies for men struggling with the challenges of fatherhood.

The aim of this study was primarily to identify strengths during the transition to fatherhood (*Fatherhood Strengths*) from interviews with 10 men. From the review of the literature, it was presumed there would be some similarities and possibly some differences to previous model of strengths. Therefore a secondary task in the study was to compare the findings with three strengths models: positive psychology's *Character Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), *Family Strengths* (Silberberg, 2001; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1989), and Cowan's (1988) characteristics of maturity in fatherhood (*maturity characteristics*).

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilised a traditional qualitative study design with principles of grounded theory to allow themes to emerge from the data rather than from any preconceived theory (Charmaz, 2000). A grounded theory approach is particularly appropriate for this study since there has been limited research in the area of interest and the study aims to develop or reformulate a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1970).

Participants

Ten fathers were recruited through a number of avenues: a mothers' play-group, parenting workshops, and through referrals from associates of the author. The author had no previous knowledge of the men's experience of fatherhood prior to recruitment. The men were first-time fathers of 2–12 month-old children, ensuring they would have current experience of the transition to fatherhood in its early stages and recent memories of the pregnancy period. All the participants were Australian men, aged from 22 to 35. There were no indigenous Australians or non English speaking men in the sample. These men came from diverse employment and educational backgrounds including: a chef, a physiotherapist, a mechanic, an engineer, a builder, and a sales representative. One father was a full time student and the others all had the equivalent of full time employment. All the female partners were primary carers of their child with only one mother working part-time.

Data Collection

The data was collected over 3 months, using a semi-structured in-depth interview (Smith, 1995), of approximately 50 minutes in duration, with each father. These interviews took place at Ngala Family Resource Centre, which was expected to provided a non-threatening and supportive location. Participants were sent an

information letter (Appendix B) several days prior to the interview and required to sign a form (Appendix A) consenting to the use the recorded data for research purposes (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). The interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed verbatim and analysed by the author.

The semi-structured interview has a number of benefits that are desirable for research such as this study of fatherhood. This approach is particularly suitable when exploring complex and personal issues (Smith, 1995); it gives flexibility to develop rapport; the participant has opportunity to introduce issues that the researcher has not anticipated; and it provides comprehensive data that is rich in description and explanation of meaning, embedded in a specific context (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interview schedule was designed with questions following the funnelling method (Minichiello, et al., 1995), beginning with questions of a broad nature that introduced the men to the subject area, then becoming more specific with unscheduled follow-up probes (Berg, 2001). Examples of the questions included: *How would you describe your experience of fatherhood?* and *Tell me about life now compared to life before having a child,* and *Are there ways in which you have changed since becoming a father?* (see Appendix C for the Interview Schedule). The men were not made unaware of the author's specific research interest into the positive aspects of fathering until a closing summary was given by the author at the conclusion of the interview.

Ethics

The participants were informed of the confidentiality of the research, of their right to withdraw from the study, and of risks associated with the research (refer to Consent Form, Appendix A, and Information Letter, Appendix B). Confidentiality of data records was maintained during the study by coding the names of participants.

Only the author knew the relationship between each participant's name and the corresponding code. Records of the data will be preserved for a minimum of five years in secure storage and the original recordings of the interviews were erased after the researcher transcribed them.

Analysis

The transcripts were read through many times by the researcher and salient statements or concepts were highlighted and coded (Berg, 2001; Smith, 1995). Data was reduced by thematic content analyses so as to organise the data into issues and themes, and draw conclusions (Berg, 2001: Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith, 1995). All statements relevant to positive fathering experiences were copied to a large data display matrix under descriptive codes so as to organise and condense the data. This enabled the raw data to be printed out and viewed all at once, minimising the reduction of "data density" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Similar codes or concepts were clustered and collapsed into superordinate themes that were contrasted and compared with each other.

To safeguard against misinterpretation and give credibility to the findings a number of methods were employed: regular peer debriefing, iterative reflection, member checking of the author's interpretations of the data, and an independent review of two transcripts at the coding stage of analysis. In addition, the author drew on his experience gained from facilitating group work with fathers and his personal experience of being a father–applying this practice wisdom in directing the interviews and in coding the transcripts. The analyses of the 10 transcripts achieved saturation (Morse, 1994), with most, if not all of the dominant themes expressed by all the men in the study, which indicated that the quantity of data was adequate.

Findings and Interpretation

The analysis of the ten interviews, produced seven fatherhood strengths themes, grouped under three dimensions (see Table 1). Each of the themes contains aspects of the men's positive subjective experience of becoming a father. Following a discussion of these themes, five contextual factors have been highlighted that were found to mediate the experience of the fatherhood strengths.

Partnership with the Mother

Nearly all the men focused on working with the mother—often sharing the duties and responsibilities as a parent, as well as appreciating the different roles they played. Three of the men expressed improvement in the partnership, for example: "My wife and I are getting on better than we've ever got on before." They explained this development in terms of being "more understanding" and "not as self centred". Two themes were evident that were associated with partnership with the mother: shared parental responsibility and complementarity.

Shared parental responsibility.

All the men talked about a commitment to "shared responsibility" and involvement in the duties of parenting, confirming Holland's (1993) finding of the primacy of fathering in men's life. Some men desired more involvement; however, many of them found the demands a challenge. "It's a pretty big thing in your life," said one man, "someone else comes in and you've got total responsibility." Another father stated: "You've got to get your priorities right—and my daughter is priority at the moment." After some difficulties soon after the birth, one father said, "it was a mutual understanding that I had to get a bit more involved and take responsibility... make sure that I felt like I was a part of the whole process." Nearly all the men used strong statements of their commitment to parenting, such as: "I just want to spend

every spare second with my family", and "this baby takes the priority over ourselves... my priority in life is family."

Table 1.

Fatherhood Strengths

Fatherhood Strengths

Elements from three other strengths models have been placed under comparable fatherhood strengths themes found in this study.

Positive Psychology Character Strengths	Family Strengths Model	Cowan's Maturity Characteristics
Peterson & Seligman, 2004	DeFrain, 1999	Cowan, 1988

Partnership with the Mother

Shared parental responsibility a commitment to involved parenting

Curiosity, Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership, Persistence, Vitality, Commitment, Sharing, Good things take time, Mutuality, Integration, Vitality/Commitment.

Complementarity appreciating the differences between Mum & Dad

Social Intelligence, Humility/Modesty, Creativity, Respect for individuality, Trust, Individuality, Differentiation.

Personal Adjustment

Adaptability meeting the challenges of fatherhood

Love of Learning, Bravery, Adaptability, Openness to change, Resilience, Adaptation.

Philosophical outlook having a positive, balanced perspective

Hope, Gratitude, Perspective, Being able to compromise, Problem solving, Locus of control, Perspective taking, Hope.

Self development experiencing personal growth

Open-mindedness, Self-regulation, Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities, Growing through crisis, Identity, Self-esteem, Regulation of emotion.

Father/Child Connection

Generative care building into the future

Kindness, Spirituality, Caring for each other, Faithfulness, Dependability, Compassion.

Bonding with the child developing father/child intimacy

Love, Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Humour, Playfulness, Humour, Sharing feelings, Sharing fun times, Enjoying each other's company, Simple good times, Quality time in quantity.

Contextual factors influencing the impact of strengths
• Couple relationship • Work conditions • Social Influences
• Health of family members • Age/maturity

Complementarity.

The men often distinguished between the responsibilities each partner had taken on, termed by some as teamwork: "I've passed the responsibility to her to a degree...its not hand balled... its just working as a team." A number of men expressed this as "an understanding that what's good for one of us is good for both of us"

Economic provision has been recognised as a particularly important aspect of fathering (Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Lamb, 1998). Most of the fathers stressed this responsibility as "provider" for the family, one man stating: "the reason behind [my work is] that my wife doesn't have to go back to work, so she can look after my son so my son has the best upbringing". Most men also expressed respect and appreciation of the mother's role, making comments like: "She managed it really well...she's a pretty strong character, and strong person...", and "she makes a beautiful home for us." However, they recognised the value of "doing kind of dad-son things", and maintaining individuality (Cowan, 1988; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1989): "we were both keen... to allow ourselves to remain individuals."

Personal Adjustment

All the men in this study emphasised the significance of the adjustment they were making in becoming a father. Three aspects to this adjustment were: adaptability, philosophical outlook, and self development.

Adaptability.

There was consensus from all of the men that they were meeting the challenges of fatherhood with willingness and a sense of determination to adapt with the changes. Some were pre-empting the changes: "I feel like I've always been preparing myself for it", while others were learning on the way: "We do a lot of

reading." For some the changes "took a little while" and for others they "really quickly made a change to our lives."

Being able to adapt seemed to give a sense of empowerment, of strength, "...knowing that we have done that, that we have gone this far we can handle challenges together." Another aspect of adapting was simply accepting that there had been change: "The biggest challenge of it all would be the acceptance. The acceptance that you don't have your time to yourself like you did before...accepting those things and getting an understanding of why its happening"

Philosophical outlook.

The theme of philosophical outlook included having a positive, hopeful perspective on life's circumstances and a healthy balance of how much control should be, or can be had over those circumstances. All the men made numerous comments that fit this description, such as: "give everything space, don't jump to conclusions...you can't change a lot of things so you work with them." Other fathers made comments like: "We've been lucky...Its just a good time in life at the moment"; and, "we're pretty blessed...things are really falling into place I feel."

Many of the men expressed a change in perspective, saying: "Now I'm just not so hung up about the little things in life...I've changed my perspective on things like that a bit"; and, "Nothing else really matters now. I don't care about the other stuff now." Regarding finances, one man said: "I used to get hung up...now I'm a bit more carefree about it to be honest." Some men were determined to make it work: "You can do it so many different ways—I'm just looking for the best way to do it." Others learnt to let go of their plans: "I'm the sort of person that logically I like to think and plan ahead...with my work I like to plan...so being a dad has taught me not to."

Self development.

Leve-Shiff and Israelashvili (1988) found that some men viewed fatherhood as a self-enriching experience that met psychological and social needs. This seemed true for most of the men in this study, with one man observing: "going from being an independent person, and all that, to this—I see a big change in me now." Another man described it like this: "I'm quite an ordered person and I sometimes get frustrated and angry if its not working. I'm a bit worried...but over the last couple of weeks I haven't had any of those thoughts at all, so maybe I've already developed in that way. Maybe I'm just getting used to it."

Other expressions of personal development described "softening", and develping "my emotional side", or making "me more reflective", and "I'm happier." One man said: "I'm not the sort of person that probably five or ten years ago could have sat if front of you and said 'I am bursting with love at the moment', but that's the sort of person I've turned into."

Father/Child Connection

Eight of the ten men made repeated comments on positive connection with their child. There were two aspects to this reported experience: generative care and bonding with the child.

Generative care.

Most of the fathers expressed a view towards building into the future so their child would experience healthy development. Erikson (1982) proposed that emerging from the development of generativity is the virtue of *care.* Many of the men expressed a caring relationship with their child and a desire to: "pass on things to him" and "teach him the best we can", or "give him every opportunity to be the best he can". They received pleasure from "just seeing stuff work", and "seeing them

evolve, seeing them do things you try and implement." There was the feeling that "the hard work does pay off. It's getting it right and the things you do working."

Often the men talked about caring for their child by providing for them, saying: "We built the house how we did, to have a family in the future", and "I look into the future to see what I can provide for my young guy." There was also a desire to protect their children: "there's something about having something so small that is completely dependent on you, that you would do anything for", another man said he would "walk over burning coals—you'd do anything, anything at all."

Bonding with the child.

Most of the fathers talked about an intimate attachment they enjoyed with their child. They made comments such as: "I'm in love, you know, it's unbelievable; "[when she's] asleep in my arms...I just love it, I just love that closeness"; and "she looks at you, and you think, that moment is ours." Another man, who found the relationship with his wife difficult, said: "I tell you one thing, I couldn't do without her [his child]—Now that I've got her. She just brings joy to me. It's something that's good in my life."

The men spoke of the relationship with their child in terms of having a "friendship with him" and that hearing "what she's doing and what's been happening" as the "highlight of every day." One man said: "they do bring you a fair bit of joy, that's for sure." Some of the men mentioned that the relationship takes time: "when he sees me he smiles and gets a little bit excited, and that helps toward me feeling like I'm more of a dad. Its taken a while—it takes time to build that up." Interactions such as these confirm the importance of play in father-child interaction (Park, 2002).

Contextual Factors

Vivid descriptions of the men's circumstances were evident throughout their dialogue on fatherhood. Although the author did not set out to consider the influence of circumstances, it become evident that the men attributed their situation as mediating their positive experiences of fatherhood. Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argued that a man required a supportive context to foster healthy development as a father. Rather than attributing fathers' behavioural shortfalls to a lack of commitment or interest, they suggested men often aspired to good fathering and their circumstances work against them. It seemed to the author that the converse is also true: the men in this study often aspired to good fathering and for some, their circumstances worked for them rather than against them. The following five contextual factors were found to be most prominent.

Couple relationship.

The relationship a father has with the mother has been found to be a critical aspect of being a father (Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Raymond, 2004), and can strongly affect a man's fathering (Grossman, Pollack & Golding, 1988). Those couples who planned the pregnancy (as reported by five of the ten fathers) often had a "positive expectation of what was going to happen." Lamb and Lewis (2004) concluded that the couple relationship predicts the father–child relationship; although, the men in this study did not clearly associate these two relationships. A few men indicated that the mother held considerable power to control the their interaction with the child (maternal gatekeeping; Allen & Hawkins, 1999). One man said the following with some regret: "my wife was a bit worried about leaving the baby, so I never got any alone time with her."

Work conditions.

An Australian survey by Weston, Gray, Qu and Stanton (2004) reported that the most important aspect of managing work and family was finding ways that work demands complement the partner's commitments and the family's routines. Work related demands have been found to often conflict with men's desire to be involved in parenting (Holland, 1993). In this study, work conditions were restrictive for some men, and for others, enhanced their availability for fathering. For the couple who both had work commitments, the father said: "we had to work around my wife's work." In retrospect, he was grateful for the opportunity to establish a close relationship with his daughter in their times together. Another father reflected: "I expected my wife to have no time for me at all after the birth. Yet it's sort of gone the reverse...[now she has more time] even though we're on one income and there are other strains—its more how I pictured my life." Some of the men related their work skills to parenting. One of the men described how his work had made him "mentally resilient" and he had developed "self-confidence and being positive" to "survive" in the work-place; attributes he claimed helped him in his fathering.

Social influences.

The men experienced varying degrees of support from extended family and friends, and research is clear that this impacts a man's experience of fathering (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Some men said their concept of fatherhood had been supported by experiences prior to having a child: "I've always enjoyed being around kids and learning about how to be a parent and what to do, and its almost as if it comes naturally without me even thinking about how to father."

Parents and parents-in-law were to some of the fathers a source of assistance, making a "night out" possible from time to time. However, friends and collegues were rarely mentioned as a source of support, other than for the mother. Four of the men didn't appreciate the many opinions given by others. One man said of the amount of advice: "It doesn't matter who you are, even guys on site [give you their opinions]...You get a bit of overload", and another said, "in the end I just threw up my hands and I will do it the way I'm going to do it. It's as simple as that."

Health of family members.

Health of the mother and child was acknowledged both by those suffering ill-health and those without any health complications. The men that experienced good health made comments like: "My hugest concern was that the child would be healthy", and: "I didn't have to worry about whether she was unwell, or whether she was going to come home sick or she wasn't handling it alright. It was a really good experience for us." One man whose family had many medical complications from early on said: "We sort of held our breath the whole pregnancy." This was reportedly an experience that influenced his fathering for months after the child's birth.

Age/maturity.

Age and maturity was acknowledged as a factor for both the younger and the older men. Some felt they had been ready for a child for a long time: "I was always keen—I would have been happy to be married at 18", others expressed a readiness that was more recent: "If I did it ten years earlier in my life I don't think I would have handled it...maybe it's a good thing that it started later in life...as far as the change of life style, I was ready for it." One of the younger fathers said: "Regardless of when it had happened I probably wouldn't have matured...I probably would have had to go through this no matter what my age was."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify men's strengths in the transition to fatherhood. From the reports of ten first-time fathers, seven fatherhood strengths and were identified: shared parental responsibility, complementarity, adaptability, philosophical outlook, self development, generative care, and bonding with the child. These strengths were in relation to the partnership with the mother, their own personal adjustment, and their connection with the child. Five contextual factors were found to mediate the fatherhood strengths: couple relationship, work conditions, social influences, health of family members and age/maturity.

Comparisons with Other Strengths Models

Interesting observations were made when comparing the fatherhood strengths with other strengths perspective models (see Table 1 for details of how the elements of other strengths models fit within the fatherhood strengths themes). Almost all of the 24 character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) were fairly evenly distributed across the seven fatherhood strengths. The matching of these two models indicated that the fathers identified a broad range of character strengths in their transition to fatherhood. This finding suggests the value of using the Signature Strengths Survey (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), in conjunction with this model for further studies of fatherhood strengths.

The family strengths model (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1989) also had most of its elements fit within the seven fatherhood strengths themes. However there were two interesting differences. Firstly, most of the family strengths elements that related to the personal adjustment theme (in this study) were from the family strength titled: *ability to cope with stress and crisis*. Coping and also resilience are certainly strengths for an individual, although both constructs presume the presence of stress

or a crisis. Also, measures of these constructs have often accounted for the absence of negative outcomes rather than the presence of strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Four of the ten men in this study found the transition to be a wonderful experience: "sensational is probably the way to describe it." This confirmed similar reports of fathering from Holland (1995). Other statements were: "For every step of the way it has been a dream", and "It's just a good time in life at the moment". For these men the experience of becoming a father was not expressed in terms of a crisis even though there were significant adjustment that had to be made. Viewed in this way, it may be limiting to assess becoming a father with constructs such as coping or resilience, since the absence of negative outcomes is only one side of the story.

A second difference from the family strengths model was the miminal reference to communication or spiritual wellbeing in the men's dialogue—both major themes in the family strengths model. Spiritual wellbeing has reportedly not been a strong theme for Australian families (Silberberg, 2001); however, healthy communication is certainly a fundamental strength for family systems (Olsen & DeFrain, 2003). It could be argued that all the fatherhood strengths themes implicitly contain aspects of communication. The lack of explicit reference to communication may reflect the difference between asking fathers about their personal experience (as this study does) and addressing issues of the family system (as the family strengths modes does). In addition, there is the likelihood of sex differences—between this report of fathers' experiences and reports biased towards mothers' experiences.

Cowan's (1988) characteristics of maturity were a particularly good fit within the personal adjustment theme of this study. The constructs of differentiation versus integration and individuality versus mutuality were helpful for describing the strengths of partnership with the mother, and to a lesser extent the connection with

the child. However, Cowan's theory did not distinguish between the strengths in relation to the mother and those with the child. Almost all the fathers in this study described their relationship with their child quite independently to their partner relationship.

Limitations of this Study

The author recognised that there are many other family types that were not represented in the sample (e.g. divorced or separated fathers, fathers of adopted children, step fathers, gay fathers). Also, the results reported in this study are unlikely to represent the strengths experienced by fathers of other cultures (see Lamb, 2004, for an overview of fathering in different cultures and family types). Costigan and Cox (2001) have found there is often a self-selection bias with the men that volunteered for research such as the current study. This likelihood is acknowledged, however, given the dominance of the themes found, and the varied experiences and backgrounds of the fathers recruited, it is considered unlikely that this bias has influenced the results of this study.

During the interviewing, it was often apparent that the men were gaining insight into their fathering as they were discussing it, many of them discussing their experience of fatherhood for the first time. This suggested limitations on retrospective reporting and cross-sectional data (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Perhaps providing questions prior to the interview to give time for reflection or conducting multiple interviews over the transition could have gained more comprehensive data. However, these alternative methods may have acted as an intervention and influenced their experience.

The experiences identified in this study were subjective self-reports and would not have reflected the strengths that may be apparent to their partners or a

health professional. Neither do they form the bases of evaluating a 'good' or 'strong' father, and cannot explain the antecedents of 'good' fathering. Nonetheless, the results in this study, offer empirical findings that give insight into men's positive experiences and possible sources of resilience in the transition to fathering.

Implications and Future Directions

Positive, hopeful perspectives and a strengths orientation are fundamental to solution–focused brief therapies and narrative therapies (Allison et al., 2003; Carr, 2000; Silberberg, 2001), and a common strategy employed by competent psychotherapists (Seligman, 2002). Saleebey (1996) argued that people in challenging circumstances are not given to thinking in terms of their strengths; therefore, therapists must work hard to devise strict and accurate accounting of client's assets so as to capitalise on their resources, talents, knowledge, and motivation. The author suggests that an awareness of fatherhood strengths would be especially helpful to clinicians working in antenatal and early parenting education, training and therapy. Being alert to fatherhood strengths and capitalising on them at critical times during the transition to fatherhood may have implications for bonding and wellbeing.

Generally, a high proportion of men attend antenatal sessions with their partners (McElligott, 2001), however, they are often dissatisfied with the experience and feel ill-prepared for their new fathering role (Lee & Schmied, 2001). Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (2004) suggest there is need for researchers to further explore fathers' views about aspects of fathering, and to discover the many characteristics associated with positively involved fathers. This study contributes towards the understanding practitioners require to effectively engage and empower men entering fatherhood, by recognising and harnessing men's existing perceived strengths.

The future of strengths approaches lies in the development of strength-based assessment tools (Lyons, Uziel-Miller, Reyes & Sokol, 2000). A possible next step toward this goal would be to test the strength themes from this study using quantitative research methods such as survey questionnaires with large population samples (Sells, Smith & Sprenkle, 1995). This approach may raise more questions that could be further explored qualitatively. Also, a longitudinal study of fatherhood strengths from early in the pregnancy period and throughout the transition to fatherhood would shed more light on how men experience different stages of the transition.

Conclusion

Strengths perspectives are gaining increased recognition in social science field, as is research into different aspects of fatherhood. The current study combines these two areas of research and has proposed a number of strengths and contextual factors perceived by men during the transition to fatherhood. Once identified by a practitioner and/or a father, positive experiences such as these fatherhood strengths can be harnessed to assist the father and the family in achieving their desired outcomes. In addition, the fatherhood strengths and contextual factors reported in this study provide insight into the positive experiences men perceive in becoming a father and offers a unique contribution to the understanding of fatherhood.

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Appendix A

Dawson Cooke
School of Psychology
Honours Research
Edith Cowan University
100 Joondalup Drive
Joondalup WA 6027

Fax (08) 6304 5834

Consent Form

Project Title: The Transition to Fatherhood

I _____ (the participant) have read the information provided with this consent form and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, realising I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study can be used to complete a publishable research report provided I am not identifiable. Confidentiality is assured apart from matters of an illegal nature, self-harm or harm to others.

I understand that I will be interviewed and the interview will be audio recorded. This recording will be erased once the interview is transcribed.

Participant _____ Date _____

Investigator _____ Date _____

If you have not received or requested a pre-addressed/paid envelope...
Please post (or Fax 6304 5834) this form to:

Att: Dawson Cooke
School of Psychology – Honours Research
Edith Cowan University
100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup WA 6027

If you require further information about this project please contact the principal investigator –
Dawson Cooke (0403 990 251 or father.research@bigpond.com)
If you have any concerns about the project or would like to talk to an independent person, you may
contact the Head of the School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University –
Dr Craig Speelman (6304 5724)

Appendix B

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

JOONDALUP CAMPUS
School of Psychology

100 Joondalup Drive,
Joondalup
Western Australia 6027
Telephone (08) 6304 5724
Facsimile (08) 6304 5834

ABN 54 361 485 361

25th May 2004

Information Letter

Project Title: The Transition to Fatherhood

Dear Participant

Thank you for your interest in research on fatherhood. This study is part of a psychology honours research project, and has the approval of the Faculty Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences (supervised by Associate Professor Lisbeth Pike and Dr. Paul Murphy). I value the unique contribution that your experience can offer to this study and the understanding of fatherhood. This letter outlines your expected participation in this research and requests your consent by signature on the attached form.

Through your participation in a 40 minute interview (at Ngala, Kensington), I hope to understand concepts related to this transition as they are revealed in your experience. During the interview, you will be asked to describe your experience of becoming and being a father. Your description can include thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as describing situations, events, places and people connected with your experience.

At any time during the interview, you may decline to answer a question or withdraw from the interview without giving a reason. Although I do not anticipate any discomfort or risks involved in the interview process, you are welcome to discuss any difficulties you experience as a result of the questions with Mr Evyn Webster of Ngala Family Resource Centre. Confidentiality is assured, as stated in the attached Consent Form. It is my hope that the interview process will be a positive experience for you that is thought provoking and enlightening.

Thank you for your time and effort. Please use the contact details below if you have any questions before signing and posting the Consent Form. You may keep this letter for your own reference,

Once I have received the Consent Form I will contact you to arrange a suitable time for the interview.

Yours sincerely,

Dawson Cooke (Principal Investigator)

If you require further information about this project please contact the principal investigator –
Dawson Cooke (0403 990 251 or father.research@bigpond.com)
If you have any concerns about the project or would like to talk to an independent person, you may
contact the Head of the School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University –
Dr Craig Speelman (6304 5724)

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

Examples of questions:

- How would you describe your experience of fatherhood?

- Tell me about life now compared to life before having a child.

- Are there ways in which you have changed since becoming a father?

- How would you describe your family now you have a child?

- In what ways are you better off now you have a child?

- What has been most difficult or challenging in transition to fatherhood?

- What are the best aspects of becoming a father?

Examples of probes

- How has this experience has changed over time?

- Give me a personal illustration or concrete example of that experience.

- How did you cope in that difficult situation?

- What is it that made that good situation so good?

    Or what contributed to that good situation?